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## Legacy of a Half Century: Dr. Osmos Lanier and His 50 Years of History Teaching

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## Legacy of a Half Century:

### Dr. Osmos Lanier and His 50 Years of History Teaching

#### **Editorial Introduction**

To commemorate the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Dr. Osmos Lanier's teaching history at Armstrong (1965-2015), our journal conducted an interview with him and some faculty members who have worked with the senior professor in the History Department. In the process of interviewing, all his colleagues and friends referred to Dr. Lanier informally as "Oz," which this essay will adopt to reflect the affection shared for him by the people in the Department and campus wide.

Hawes Hall, an unassuming building on Armstrong's campus, houses a curious treasure. Across from the History Department's main office, accompanied by other treasures in a glass case, inspired investigators and curious spectators can find a picture of the History Department's faculty, a picture dating back decades with an eyebrow-raising sight: a Southern-born, Savannah-living professor from the 1970s sporting the uniform of a hippie down to the follicles. Today, that same professor, Dr. Osmos "Oz" Lanier, has cut his long hair and aged a few years, but he is very much the same man in many ways as when he joined the Armstrong faculty in 1965. Prof. Barbara Fertig confides that Oz's "quiet dignity" today conceals a "wild and crazy guy." Besides a three year retirement between 1997 and 2000, Oz has been driving aspiring history students "crazy" with essay questions and making a strong impression on his fellow professors for half a century. In the fifty years since he arrived in Savannah, he has made and

continues to make lasting impressions and fond memories at Armstrong, all the while holding steadfast to the liberal mindset that he looks back proudly on today.

### “Second Choice”

When Oz began college at La Grange in 1953, he wanted to major in music. Rather than “giving his parents an ulcer”—he claims they saw a degree in music as “a quick ticket to New York and a life of drugs,” he instead settled in for a history degree that he would put to use his whole life. Although it was a “second choice,” he’s certainly getting mileage out of it. Upon receiving his Ph.D at the University of Georgia in 1965, he made a beeline straight for Savannah, captivated by “its rich colonial history, enamored by the Spanish moss and...well, that would be the cookie-cutter explanation for a student of history coming to Savannah.” In reality, he remembers that his choice had much to do with the renowned St. Patrick’s Day festivities. Fifty years later, Oz calls the city where he and his wife Fran have helped raised six children and five grandchildren his home, and although “it was a bit of a whim,” it’s a choice he hasn’t regretted.

### “A Second Family”

He has a large family, but he still has a fond bond to Armstrong, calling the History Department a “second family.” Members of the history faculty reciprocate this feeling. Not only has Oz imparted valuable knowledge to some of his colleagues, but he formed close friendships during his long years of service. Prof. Michael Price reveals that before Armstrong, he did not fully understand the politics of college, and referenced Oz as teaching him “how to survive and

prosper at Armstrong.” Both of them being, as Prof. Price professed, “re-constructed white southern men,” they developed a kinship outside of simple mentorship. Prof. Chris Hendricks, another addition to the expanded history department during 1990s, recalls how losses in both of their families gave them an immediate connection; Oz helped him on his first day of class when he had to attend his grandfather’s funeral. And as for Prof. Michael Hall, it has been a nice thing to start with an 8 AM class together with Oz for the past seventeen years (being likeable at 8 AM alone speaks volumes for anyone’s character). In the eyes of Prof. Hongjie Wang, a junior faculty whose office used to be the next door, Oz always talked and acted like a loving grandpa, “slow, yet full of wisdom and power.” Outside of coming to work and going home to watch MSNBC, Oz treats Armstrong and his colleagues as more than on-the-clock sounding boards to talk to at work and forget they exist when he’s off campus.

### “See Them as Human Beings”

This veteran professor treats his students much the same way. He teaches with an old school flare, foregoing the modern trappings of powerpoints and other ADD-oriented technology. He might have been every freshman’s “nightmare” because he staunchly believes in essay questions over multiple choices, and he has sound reasoning to do so: he wants to “emphasize putting ideas together, which is the goal of college” and “not to teach one *what*, but to teach one *how*.” He genuinely wants to see his students learn, to “see them as human beings, not as a number.” One trick to do that, he says, is to learn their names as soon as possible—“respect their identity.” In this way, Oz did not become a professor just to throw facts at students and hope they stick long enough for them to pick between A, B, C, or D; he also didn’t become a professor just to work

on his own repertoire of publications. His advice to other professors is to “put to death the notion of ‘publish or perish’” or to help the university system rely less on that idea to measure a professor’s worth, which seems to be an increasing phenomenon.

### “Capital L Liberal Spirit”

Oz has seen a lot of changes at Armstrong. Perhaps most notably and most importantly to him when he looks back on it is the diversification at Armstrong. The Armstrong Oz came in to once proudly boasted exactly TWO minority students! Spending his life debunking the archetype of Southern Conservatism as a Civil Rights’ activist, those low numbers disheartened Oz. When public schools in Savannah began using integrated buses, he memorizes the tension it caused: The bus driver who came to pick his kids up that day informed him that she wouldn’t be “bringing them back”—she was quitting, because she did not agree to the changes. In his neighborhood, five kids who took to calling themselves “the Jackson Five,” waited at the bus stop, his children included. Today, seeing Obama as president and Hillary Clinton being a serious contender really makes his “capital L liberal” (Prof. Hendricks’ words) spirit content. In a world of dualities that poses liberals against conservatives, Oz’s casual profession of left-mindedness could be a point of contention, but he has a very sportsmanlike friendship with some of his colleagues who might lean on conservative views.

That is the impression Oz gives—as someone who can get along with anyone and has enriched lives every hour of every year he has taught at Armstrong. This moment being the 50<sup>th</sup> year since his teaching is only an excuse to recognize him, but he has been a fond thought to

many in the Department on his 49<sup>th</sup> anniversary, his 48<sup>th</sup>, and every year rolling far back. Some cite his humor, which is “not always easy to catch,” as his selling point: Prof. Fertig remembers being flustered by him asking if she was at his office to measure for draperies when she was moving in to his old office. But far beyond making his colleague’s smirk, Oz has the respect, admiration, and appreciation of the History Department and the minds he has taught, the students he has treated as people, and the world he has made just a little more equal.

#### Addendum: The Lanier Conference Room

Students who have been intrigued by Oz’s legacy and taken the journey to view the young, hippy Lanier in the case adjacent to the front office, may also be interested in this next treasure. Peak inside the History building’s conference room, known as the “Lanier Conference Room” as of April 10, 2015, and see what kind of honors five decades of teaching receives. At what Dr. Hall coined as “Oz-fest,” Oz’s fellow professors dedicated the meeting room to his name and posted a plaque with his picture and accomplishment on the wall.

(Interviewed by Elizabeth Weibush)